

Do you Know the Drill?

District leaders are becoming more proactive with emergency drills.

By:

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Whether your school buildings are decades old with doors that need locks, or your high-tech surveillance cameras capture every image in hallways, one of the best defenses against a violent threat is practicing emergency and lockdown drills, according to safety and security experts.

In some buildings, classroom doors lack locks and exterior doors are old. Other buildings have public announcement systems that don't work well throughout a school building or that lack speakers in restrooms. Still others have classrooms without telephones or main offices that are not centrally located, allowing visitors to enter without being detected, according to Kenneth Trump, president of National School Safety and Security Services, which provides safety consulting to districts. Fortified facilities and equipment play a big role in security, Trump says, but being alert and informed is most important. "The first and best line of defense is a well-trained, highly alert and informed staff and student body," Trump says. "We over rely on physical security and we forget the human element."

Aside from having emergency response plans, every district should practice emergency drill scenarios, even if it isn't mandated statewide, to ensure students and staff s are kept as safe as possible during potentially violent scenarios. Aside from the typical, age-old fire drill and tornado drill in tornado-prone states, more state legislatures are mandating lockdown drills. For example, Indiana and Oklahoma just this year mandated two lockdown drills per year in districts, among a total of 18 states that mandate some type of emergency drill, according to the Education Commission of the States, which collects such statistics.

When announcing emergencies over PA systems, honesty is the best policy, Trump says. To use code language, like "a red Ferrari is parked outside," to alert staff that someone brought a gun to school is only confusing and doesn't get the point across. Simply state that the school is in lockdown, Trump adds.

However, Scott Poland, prevention division director for the American Association of Suicidology and a District Administration columnist, is quick to point out that drills can frighten students. Dramatic scenarios, which may involve police running through hallways while students are present, are unnecessary, he says. "I get concerned when police and administrators get too dramatic," Poland says. "I'm not a big believer in SWAT teams running through the school or firing off blank gunshots."

***"This is for their own safety.
They know they live in a violent world." -***

*James Warfel, director of student services,
South Brunswick (N.J.) Public Schools*

Drills are helpful when they ensure teachers and staff members communicate well with one another and take measures to keep track of and account for every student in the building. Drills are also about ensuring students obey the nearest adult's direction without question, Poland says. "The main point [of a drill] is to have it be a learning experience," he says. "It does not have to scare anyone."

Poland suggests that after an emergency drill, students and staff should be able to discuss and decompress from the event. Psychological counselors should also visit classrooms to help students or staff members who might have relived a prior, unrelated trauma during the drill.

Federal Grants

Under the No Child Left Behind law, school districts must document how they keep their schools safe and drug free in order to get federal funding. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools recently announced new federal grant awards, totaling \$24 million, to help school districts develop, enhance and fortify their emergency plans. The Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) grant program provides funds for local districts to improve and strengthen such plans. Funds may be used to conduct drills and exercises as well as buy emergency supplies and equipment and train school personnel and students in emergency response procedures.

While many schools claim they have emergency plans, which are mandated by the federal government, a few districts go the extra mile to prepare for any possible scenario, Trump says. Here are examples of districts that are most prepared.



SOUTH BRUNSWICK PUBLIC SCHOOLS

One day last March, Principal Tim Mahoney walked the hallways of South Brunswick High School in New Jersey, looking for students who were hiding in dark classrooms in the case of an "active shooter." It was part of a lockdown drill. Most students and teachers were complying with the protocol of staying out of sight, quiet and still.

VTN (visibility, travel and noise) is the safety code for South Brunswick (N.J.) Public Schools. The goal of administrators and staff is to eliminate visibility, travel and noise during a lockdown drill, which occurs once each fall and spring in every school building in the district, says James Warfel, director of student services.

"We don't want our kids to know how we're going to respond or what we're going to do."

-Mark E. Kissel, chief of school police, Cherokee County (Ga.) Schools

For example, if the scenario of a drill involves a gunman in the school, an administrator, usually the principal, announces a lockdown over the public address system, and students are instructed to sit quietly in one corner of their classroom, away from windows and doors, with the lights turned off, Warfel says. The district is different from many, according to Trump, because administrators realize the importance of practicing drills during logistically difficult times, such as lunchtime. For example, a principal will announce a lockdown drill over the PA system, which alerts the staff to go into "automatic gear," Warfel says. Cafeteria staff members and supervisors are trained to follow the same protocol, whereby they find the keys to the cafeteria doors and lock them from the inside, so students and staff are safe inside the cafeteria. Some students in the cafeteria might be moved to nearby classrooms and the faculty room, outside the cafeteria, with staff members.

The district also holds drills in which students who are on playing fields or the playgrounds are to stay at a location determined at that time. "It varies given the nature of the threat," Warfel says. Students at the middle school might be herded to the middle school football stadium on school grounds, for example.

If the police are pursuing a bank robber near one of the schools, for example, or if there is a gas leak, students are required to stay inside the school building. Classes carry on as usual until the suspect is apprehended or the leak is fixed, Warfel says. At first, drills created some anxiety, but now students are almost used to it, Warfel says. "Our kids are so conditioned," he says. "This is for their own safety. They know they live in a violent world."

CHEROKEE COUNTY SCHOOLS

Prior to the April 1999 Columbine High School tragedy in Colorado, Georgia law allowed school districts to form their own police departments. Cherokee County School District in Canton, Ga., which has 36 schools, already had officers in place at the high schools, but Superintendent of Schools Frank Petruzielo recommended to the school board that a school police department be created to respond to any violent situation, according to Mark E. Kissel, chief of school police.

Prior to having their own district police department, individual schools that had less violent problems, such as fights, would call 911, according to Sgt. James Morris. The police department now handles all the situations, big or small, in-house, Morris adds. The central office houses the headquarters, and an officer is stationed at each high school and middle school.

The board also adopted several major priorities that included providing a safe and secure environment for teaching and learning. In Georgia, all secondary schools must have a school safety plan approved by the Georgia Emergency Management Agency (GEMA). Working with the Cherokee County sheriff's office and GEMA, the district assessed high school safety and formulated a countywide response protocol for situations that give rise to a multiagency emergency response.

In the meantime, Kissel and his staff of 13 trained police officers (who carry weapons) continued to build a district wide emergency response plan. As in various other districts nationwide, every school in the Cherokee County district runs a Code Red drill one time per semester, or twice a school year, Kissel says. In a Code Red lockdown, which is when teaching and learning cease, usually a school principal announces the lockdown on the PA system. "We want to make certain the crisis and security teams can respond and students understand the protocol," Kissel says. "The doors are locked, the blinds on the windows are drawn."

Once the threat is contained, students can be transported to an off-site area to be reunited with family, according to what is called the parent-student reunification plan. In case of a fire, explosion, bomb threat or active shooting situation that has been contained, the plan is designed to shuttle students, staff and others from any school building in the district off-site via buses to a predesignated location. For elementary students, a high school gym could work.

A local church could also take in up to 4,200 people, Kissel says. Students stay put until parents or guardians pick them up.



Reunification Teams

Cherokee County's reunification plan is unique in that a School Crisis Team of about 40 to 60 people comprised of guidance and psychological counselors, food service workers, school nurses and support staff in the central office are responsible for meeting the mental and physical health needs of those arriving at the reunification site, Kissel says. Parents and guardians can then pick up their children.

The team is transported from the school via bus with a police escort to the site, where members are responsible for student and staff check-in, medical triage, parent and guardian check-in, counseling, food and beverage distribution, media relations and technology support. While this team sets up, school nurses respond to the crisis location and assist EMS personnel.

PASS the Information

The district police department also created Parental Awareness for Safe Schools (PASS), which is essentially a neighborhood watch program for schools, to provide parents and guardians with vital information relevant to school safety and security. Participating parents contact other parents using media such as television and radio. Each school is viewed as a community and, therefore, the program is facilitated through each school's PTA. Two percent of the PASS members must attend the first PTA meeting of the year that covers the district's crisis management plan. "Our intent is to keep the parents informed and put their minds at ease," Kissel says. Six of the 36 schools district wide are PASS community schools, and Kissel wants more schools involved.

After a school adopts the PASS program, the PTA is responsible for creating a Parent Emergency Response Team (PERT), which is composed of about 10 to 15 parent volunteers who help other parents respond to the reunification site during a crisis. PERT members answer questions, alleviate fears and assist parents in filling out reunification forms. They are an integral part of the district wide search team. No devices were found, but information was obtained that resulted in three students' arrests.

A letter was sent home with students explaining to parents what had transpired and the ultimate outcome, which was that everyone was safe.

School's Out, Shooter Drills In

When Cherokee County students are not in school-for example, during spring break-active shooter drills" with members of the sheriff 's department are held, Kissel says. Two or three officers conduct a mock drill in which they respond to an active shooter in a school building. "It's one thing to have a county response protocol, and it's another thing to never practice it and make sure it works," Kissel says. Keeping students out of the active shooter drills is also about keeping the plan secret. "We don't want our kids to know how we're going to respond or what we're going to do," he says.

FORT WAYNE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

At Fort Wayne (Ind.) Community Schools, security director John Weicker says all 11 middle schools practiced this past school year their written "off-site emergency evacuation plans" mandated by Rita Turflinger, the area administrator for the district's middle schools. For example, just prior to the end of the school year, Northwood Middle School practiced evacuating students to the nearby Bishop Dwenger High School gym, forcing students and staff to cross a busy road. Even though it posed some logistical problems, administrators knew they had to conduct the drill. "It takes time organizing, setting up an evacuation site where students have to cross a state highway that runs through town," Weicker says. "It's a tough intersection, so we need the police there."

Weicker is confident the elementary and high schools will also complete a practice run of their written off-site evacuation plans this school year. "These plans are unique to each school and are time consuming and difficult to practice, as it actually requires that you move your entire student body/staff from the school campus to your designated off-site evacuation site," he says. "Practice makes for the best hope for success."

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-John Weicker, security director, Fort Wayne (Ind.) Community Schools

The procedures include having teachers take class rosters and cell phones with them and keeping students as calm and quiet as is humanly possible. In a Northwood evacuation, for example, administrators are to wear orange vests for identification purposes and to have access to a walkie-talkie. Different grades of students are to use different exits and doors in the building as specified in the procedure. Two staff members are to hold large Stop signs at cross streets. Once students cross the busy Washington Center Road to Bishop Dwenger's gym, students are to sit in rows on the gym floor. Every teacher takes attendance to account for every student. Parents wanting to get their children must have received prior authorization with a school administrator.

One day in late May, the evacuation drill ensued, with students escorted across the state highway on Washington Center Road with the help of police. A teacher from another district happened to be waiting at the intersection and wrote a congratulatory note to the district, saying how well behaved the students were. Weicker credits the Fort Wayne police for assisting the district and other city schools in providing safety for staff and students, by helping them deal with existing issues, and in ongoing preparation for the "unthinkable."

Challenges

While the South Brunswick, Cherokee County and Fort Wayne schools have noteworthy drills, keeping all staff members and teachers abreast of the emergency response plan is challenging, says Kissel from Cherokee County. "I end up with new teachers every year," he says.

To ensure new staff members are prepared, Kissel created Camp Cherokee, which is a four-hour program in the summer in which staff members learn safety and security protocols and expectations needed for academic achievement. For example, they learn where they can lead students in an emergency and what doors to use, he says. Although class rosters are maintained electronically, Kissel encourages teachers to carry grade books with them during lunch and other times when students are with them so that if there is an emergency, they have every student's name for accountability purposes. "It's to make sure we don't have people roaming around like deer in headlights," Kissel adds.

Teachers are also encouraged to store snacks, water and coloring books for the lower elementary school students in cabinets in classrooms in case an emergency leaves them trapped in school for hours on end. Teachers are even asked to know how to create a temporary latrine out of heavyduty trash bags and a cardboard box, in case students need to relieve themselves, Kissel says.

Physically challenged students can't descend stairs quickly, so Kissel bought an evacuation apparatus that allows wheelchair-bound students and students with other handicaps to ascend and descend floors. "We never had to use it, but we have practiced with it," he says.

Weicker from Fort Wayne schools adds that convincing administrators to take the time to train is another challenge. Given American education's obsession with testing and meeting standards, "to get a building level person to think it's important enough to take time away from task is a tough nut to crack," Weicker says. "I've been doing this for quite a while and, unfortunately, things seem to take off after a tragedy."

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